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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Shoreline Community College (SCC) to determine the differences in the personal characteristics and attitudes of students who excel in freshman composition courses and those who fail. Telephone interviews were conducted with 25 students who obtained a B+ or higher and 25 students who received an F in freshman composition between winter 1986 and spring 1987. Students were asked to provide information on their personal characteristics, history of success in English classes, college enrollment goals and influences, expected course grade, and evaluation of the instructor and instructional method. They were also asked about the reasons for their achievement level, activities competing with academic studies, strategies for studying and writing, attitudes toward college in general and English specifically; and awareness of resources for assistance in English. Study findings included the following: (1) over half of the "F" students were no longer enrolled at SCC, and most of them had no plans to return; (2) nearly 33% of the "A" students said that the primary reason for their success was that they consistently sought out the instructor for guidance and feedback; (3) among the "A" students, "the teacher" was listed most frequently as the "greatest hindrance to higher achievement," while "F" students were more likely to cite "lack of motivation"; and (4) 24% of the "F" students had taken and failed freshman composition a second time. (EJV)

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WHO ARE WE MISSING?

WHY SOME STUDENTS ARE FAILING...

AND HOW OTHERS ARE SUCCEEDING

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Scott Douglas Loucks

April 14, 1988

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WHO ARE WE MISSING? WHY SOME STUDENTS ARE FAILING FRESHMAN COMPOSITION...AND HOW OTHERS ARE SUCCEEDING.

Introduction

Why do some students fail college composition courses, while other students excel beyond our highest expectations? Some of us who teach writing, unfortunately, give that question little serious consideration. We want our students to do well, but we are frequently unsure what teaching strategy is most effective. For many of us, understanding specific reasons for student success or failure in composition courses remains elusive.

Beyond generalizations, the reasons for student success or failure in college composition courses have received little direct attention in the literature. Most studies have been targeted toward improving instructional techniques, while perceptions and characteristics of students that excel or fail composition have been ignored. One wonders: Would a profile of students who are having the greatest difficulty in class compared to students enjoying the greatest success serve as a helpful source for guiding learning and developing effective teaching strategies?

William Perry (College Communication, 1968) provided one of the first studies of students to determine how differences between home cultures and academic cultures inhibit academic achievements. In related research, Sypher, Witt, and Sypher

(Communication Monographs, 1986) studied how cognitive differentiation serves as a predictor of written communication ability. In addition, Patricia Bizzel (College Composition and Communication, 1986) suggested that freshman students who experience difficulties in college composition classes possess a set of dialects, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking different from the standards expected by the instructor (and the institution). Bizzel argued that "there is a need to understand the world views that basic writers bring to college in light of the world view demanded by academia."

A study performed by the author, (Author name, Resources In Education, January 1987), suggested that many students fail basic composition courses not because of an academic inability, but because of other factors. One of the factors hypothesized was the attitudinal disposition of students. Surprisingly, many of the students in the study who failed composition courses (or passed with only a minimum grade), scored above average on reading, writing, and vocabulary placement tests.

The literature seems to suggest that an understanding of students' perceptions and backgrounds will provide a helpful revelation that may, in turn, suggest successful teaching strategies. Analyzing the reasons for student success or failure in composition courses as a means of teaching, guiding, and assisting is the focus of this study.

BACKGROUND

Who's Making The Grade? And Who's Not?

Shoreline Community College in Seattle, Washington served as the site of this study. Shoreline provides open enrollment to over 7,000 full and part-time freshman and sophomore students from a wide variety of ethnic cultures and social stratas (although the largest student group is white and middle class). The college offers from seven to twelve basic composition courses each quarter.

The number of students receiving a failing grade in all courses at Shoreline during the 1986 - 1987 academic year totaled about 3% of the total student population. Students who received a failing grade in all English 101 composition courses between 1986 and 1987 reflect a similar trend. Approximately 3.5% of the students who were enrolled in the freshman composition course (English 101) during this time did not succeed receiving less than a 1.0 numerical score on a 4.0 scale. Approximately 2.5% succeeded only minimally, receiving a numerical score of 1.0.

Approximately 20% of students who enrolled in freshman composition earned a grade of 3.5 or higher. Nearly 50% earned a course grade of 3.0 or higher, and 78% earned a grade of 2.0 or higher.

STUDY DESIGN

Subjects

In August 1987, two groups of freshman composition students were selected for interviews. Using a random numbers table, students were chosen from freshman composition grade sheets from courses offered Winter 1986 through Spring 1987. In order to prevent results unique to only a few instructors, the students were randomly selected from seven different English 101 courses taught by seven full and part-time instructors.

Twenty five students who had failed freshman composition with a grade of .9 or below were selected for the first study group (the F group). This group represented over 90% of all the students who had failed English 101 during this time period. Twenty-five students who had received a 3.5 or higher in English 101 (the A group) were randomly selected for the second study group from the same classes during the same five quarters.

METHODOLOGY: Interviews and Questionnaire

All interviews were conducted over the telephone. After being assured of anonymity, each student was asked to respond to the same set of 36 questions. Twenty seven questions were stated in specific quantifiable terms and rated on a bipolar scale, while nine questions were left open-ended, (although later quantified for analysis).

The questions (available from the author upon request) were specifically designed to gain: 1)basic demographic information, 2)history of success in English courses, 3)goals and motivating factors, 4)course expectations and evalution, 5)instructor and instructional method evaluation, 6)assessment of student's perception of reasons for achievement level 7)assessment of factors competing with academic studies, 8)assessment of student strategy for studying and writing, 9)assessment of students' attitude toward college in general and English specifically, and 10)assessment of students' awareness of resources for assistance in English.

RESULTS

Answers from both groups of students were recorded, compiled, and tabulated. The most significant statistical comparisons between the two groups are described in the following paragraphs.

Students who excelled in freshman composition ranged in age from 18 to 45 and an average age of 24.8 contrasting significantly with failing students whose ages ranged from 18 to 25 with an average age of 19.8. The college grade point average for successful students was 3.53, failing students averaged 1.64.

Males and females were nearly equally represented in both groups and both groups were predominantly Caucasian. All students in the

"A" group were native speakers of English, and 92% of the students in the "F" group were native speakers.

Ninety-six percent of the students in both groups had completed the basic high school requirements. Eight percent of the students in the "A" group had participated in English honor programs in high school, while none of the failing students had done so. The "A" group received an average grade of 3.16 in high school English courses, while students in the "F" group averaged 2.44 in high school English classes.

When asked to rate how well their high school English classes had prepared them for college-level English, 16% of the "A" students responded "extremely well"; 32%, "more than adequate"; 40% "adequate"; and 12%, "less than adequate." In contrast, 56% of students in the "F" group rated their high school classes as less than adequate. Twenty percent said "adequate;" 16 percent, "more than adequate;" and 8%, "extremely well." (See Figure 1).

When asked why they decided to enroll in college, 72% of the successful students said that they wanted to because they had a specific goal in mind, 28% said that they wanted to, but didn't have a specific goal. (See Figure 2). Seventy-six percent planned to attend a four year college or university and 68% said that they had a specific career goal. Eighty percent of the A students had decided on a major field of study.

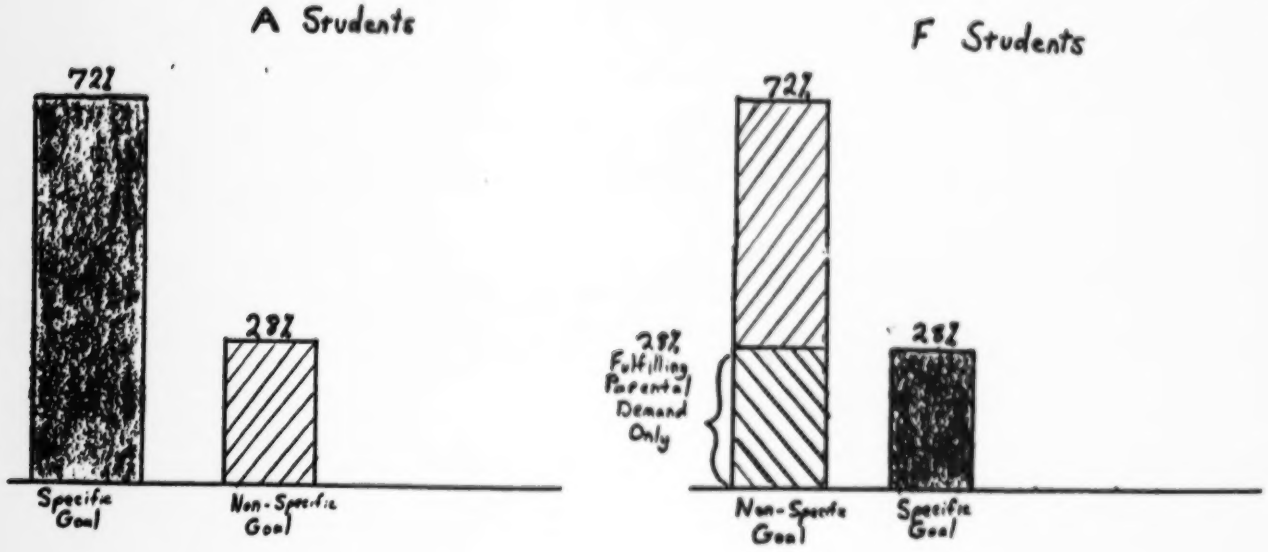
Figure 1

Students Respond To: How well did your high school English classes prepare you for college-level composition?

	Extremely Well	More than Adeq.	Adequate	Less than Adeq.	Not at all
A students n = 25	16%	32%	40%	12%	0%
F students n = 25	8%	16%	28%	56%	0%

Figure 2

Students Respond To: "What was your motivation for enrolling in college?"



Twenty-eight percent of the failing students said that they enrolled in college primarily because their parents wanted them to; 44% wanted to enroll in college, but lacked a specific goal; and 28% wanted to enroll in college and had a specific goal in mind. (See Figure 2). Sixty four percent of the failing students planned to attend a four year college or university and 48% had a specific career goal, and 52% had decided on a major field of study.

Sixty-four percent of the A students expected to receive the grade that they were given, while 36% expected a somewhat lower grade. Eighty percent of the F students expected to receive the grade that they were given, while 20% expected a higher grade.

When asked to rate the amount of work required in the class, 4% of the A students said that it was very much above what they expected; 20%, somewhat above what they expected; 48%, about what they expected; 24%, somewhat below what they expected; and 4%, very much below what they expected. When asked to rate the difficulty of the material presented in class, 20% said that it was above average in difficulty, 60% said that it was of average difficulty, and 20% said below average difficulty.

Rating the amount of work required in the class, 4% of the F students said that it was very much above what they expected; 52%, somewhat above; and 40%, about what they expected; and 4%,

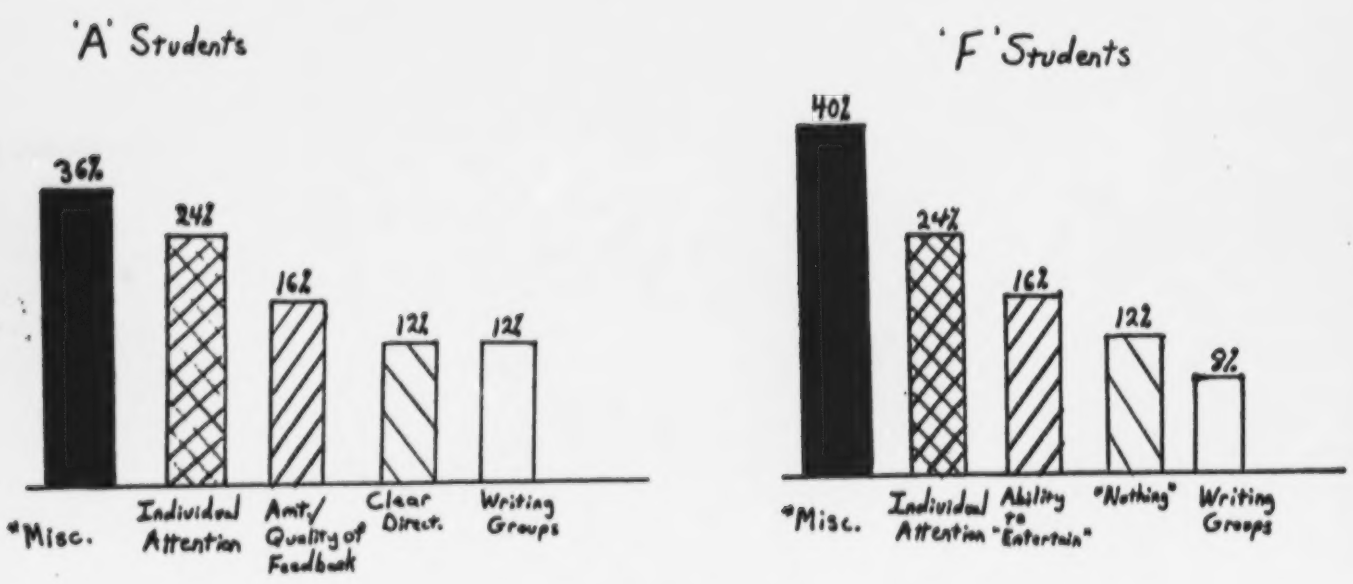
somewhat below. Rating the difficulty of material presented in class, 36% said that it was above average; 48%, average; and 16%, below average.

When rating the instructor's ability to teach the class, 48% of the A students gave an excellent rating; 28 percent said above average, and 24% said average. Ninety-two percent of the students said that they would choose the same English instructor again if they retook the class.

Twelve percent of the F students gave the instructor a rating of excellent; 20%, above average; 48%, average; 16%, below average; and 4%, very poor. Forty four percent of the F students said that they would choose the same instructor again, while 66% said that they would not.

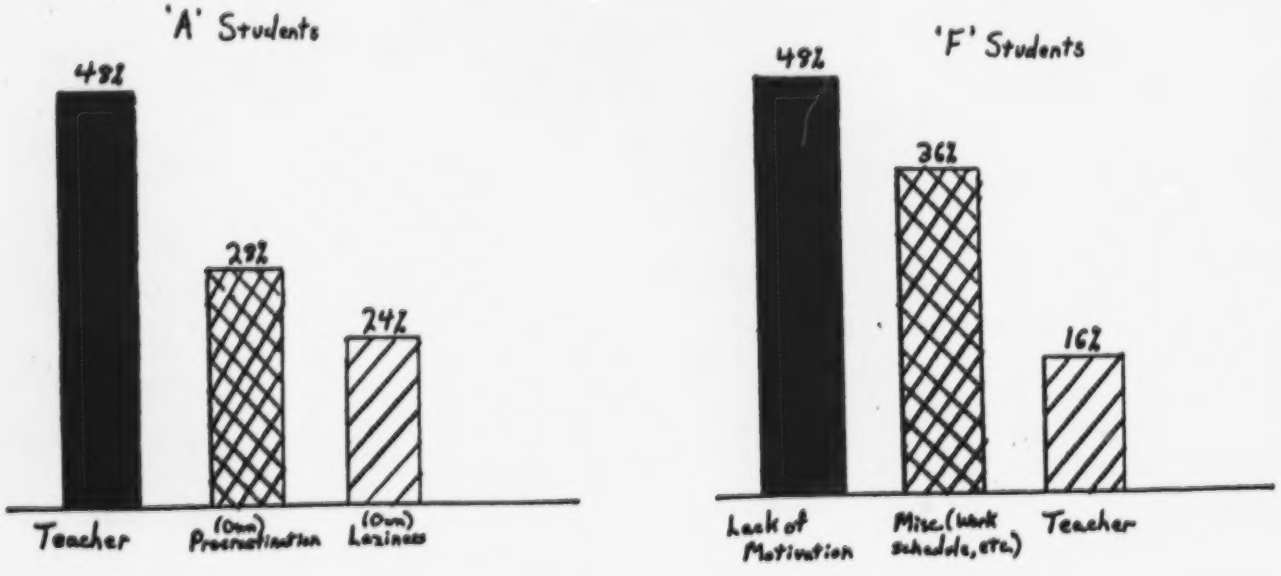
Both groups were asked to list the instructional methods that were most helpful. The two most common replies among the successful students were praise for 1) the individualized attention given by the teacher 24%, and 2) the amount and quality of teacher feedback on writing assignments 16%. (See Figure 3). Other responses included expressions of appreciation for the use of in-class writing groups, the instructor's ability to communicate clearly, and the instructor's use and selection of the text.

Figure 3 Students Respond To: "What instructional methods were most helpful?"



* Misc. includes a wide and varied range of student responses.

Figure 4 Students Respond To: "What was your greatest hindrance to higher achievement?"



When asked what instructional methods were most helpful, F students also praised the instructor's personal attention to individual students (20%). The second most common response (16%), however, (not mentioned by the A group), was praise for the instructor's ability to be humorous, entertain, and hold the student's interest. A number of students also praised the use of in-class writing groups while 12% of the students could not think of any instructional methods that were helpful.

Criticism was also solicited from both groups. The A students had the greatest criticism for teachers who failed to give clear directions, explanations, and examples on writing assignments (20%); while 12% said that they wanted greater freedom to choose writing assignment topics. In comparison, 24% of the F students wanted more individual help from the instructor, 12% said that they wanted a more exciting lecture style, and 12% would have liked clearer directions, explanations, and examples.

When asked about the process they used to complete a writing assignment, students from both groups gave a variety of answers and indicated a wide range of approaches. Twenty-eight percent of the successful students completed three or more drafts, 44% of the students in the A group used brainstorming techniques and two drafts, and 24% completed only one edited draft. No student in the F group wrote more than two drafts, 44% used brainstorming techniques and two drafts, 20% completed only one draft.

Do students seek help? Do they know where to get it? Only 20% of A students sought tutoring or assistance from a parent, relative, or friends during the quarter, while 88% knew that there were opportunities for assistance on campus. Forty percent of F students sought assistance from a parent, relative, or friends, while 56% knew that there were opportunities for help on campus.

Sixty-eight percent of the F group had not taken any additional English course since freshman composition. Significantly, 24% of the failing students had re-enrolled in English 101, but failed the class a second time.

During the quarter that they were enrolled in freshman composition, successful students averaged 13 credit hours, spent about 6.56 hours a week doing homework for the class, and worked an average of 25.6 hours a week. Of those who worked, 50% said that their work schedule didn't hinder their studying for the course, 39% said that work somewhat hindered their studying, and 11% said that their work hindered their studying quite a bit.

Failing students averaged 14 credit hours, spent about 5.48 hours a week doing homework for the class, and worked an average of 31 hours each week. Of those who worked, 35% said that their work schedule didn't hinder their studying for the course, 25% said

that their work somewhat hindered their studying, and 40% said that their work hindered their studying quite a bit.

When asked to point out the greatest hindrance to even greater achievement in the class, 48% of successful students pointed their finger at the teacher, 28% noted that it was their own procrastination, while 24% mentioned their own "laziness." (See Figure 4).

Only 16% of the F students said that their failure was due to the teacher, while 28% of students in the F group said that their own lack of motivation for being in college was their greatest hindrance to higher achievement. The second most common answer, attendance (20%) was frequently mentioned in unison with lack of motivation. Other typical answers included "my work schedule" and "I hate English." (See Figure 4).

When asked to rate their own attitude toward college coursework, in general, 20% of the A students said it was excellent; 64%, above average; 12%, average, and 4%, below average. On the same scale they responded to their attitude towards English composition. Twenty-eight percent said excellent; 36%, above average; and 36%, average.

Rating their attitude toward college coursework in general, 4% of the failing students said it was above average, 20%, average; 44%, below average; and 32%, poor. Rating their attitude toward

studying English composition, 4% said that it was above average; 24%, average; 44%, below average; and 28%, poor.

Why/how did you succeed? Thirty-two percent of the successful group said that their time, effort, and hard work was the primary reason for their success, while 28% was that they succeeded because they sought out the instructor on a consistent basis for feedback on writing assignments. Twenty percent simply said that their skills in composition "come naturally." Most students in the A group also noted that they thought their regular attendance in class played a significant part in their success.

Failing students offered a variety of reasons for their low performance in the the composition classes. The most common responses, however, were related to lack of motivation for doing well in school. Typical responses included "didn't try," "wasn't disciplined," or "wasn't motivated to do the work,"(40%); and absence from class,(32%). Only one student mentioned that she failed because she lacked the ability and understanding to do the work required in the course. When asked if they would do anything differently if they had the chance to retake the class, 96% said that they would. The most typical response, 48%, was a non-specific reply of "just try harder" or "put more effort into the class," while 12% of the students said that they would make sure that they attended class on a regular basis, and 12% that they would now have a stronger motivation for succeeding in the

course. Clearly, attitude tends to mirror motivation and influence achievement.

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

A student's age had a very high correlation with success in the composition course. On average, the successful students were five years older than those students who did not do as well. During the interviews the older students, frequently mentioned that they were better prepared for college-level writing than their younger counterparts. As one student explained, "I have more experience in life...I have more to say." In addition, the age and experience factor seemed to influence other areas, including motivation to do well, approach to the writing task, and increased initiatitve/ability to interact with the instructor. In contrast, many of the failing students said that they were not yet ready (motivationally) for college level work. As one student explained, "I didn't know what I wanted to do yet. My attitude then (i.e. during time of enrollment) was that school was a waste of time unless you know what you're going to do." As another student put it, "I just wanted to play, I wasn't into it...school wasn't my primary concern."

While failing students received a .72 lower grade point average in high school English courses than did students who excelled, the difference magnifies significantly at the college level with a 3.0 gpa spread that now seperates the two groups. Also significant is that over half of the failing students said that their high school English classes failed to prepare them for the requirements of college-level writing. Although several students explained that their own lack of work in high school English classes contributed to their lack of readiness, most students explained that there was a specific dearth of writing requirements in their high school experience. In contrast, only about a tenth of students who received an A for the class considered their high school writing requirements as less than adequate preparation.

Both groups also contrasted significantly in their reasons for attending college. Nearly three fourths of the successful students had specific educational and career goals in mind. In contrast, nearly three fourths of the failing students lacked clearly defined reasons for attending college. Nearly 30% of these students were attending college only to appease their parents'wishes. Clearly, motivation for attending college is another major factor that influences student success.

While a majority of failing students felt unprepared for college-level composition, only about one third of these students rated the work required "above what they expected," while 64% rated the

difficulty of the material as average or below average difficutly.

Students in both groups expressed deep appreciation for instructors who took the time to meet with them on a one-to-one basis. As one student explained, "I really appreciated his patience, he was always willing to help out. I never felt like I was bothering him if I needed help." Another student said, "She cared a lot about me as an individual." This finding suggests that individualized attention to student needs is time well invested.

Students from the failing group also gave high praise to instructors who could entertain and hold their attention. Arousing and maintaining a high level of interest could increase the likelihood of success for these students. More important in teaching the highly motivated student is providing quality/quantity feedback on writing assignments. One A student who praised his teacher said, "She provided copious comments on the papers...a tremendous amount of effort on constructive criticism." Another student said of her instructor, "She provided excellent feedback on my papers, constructive comments on better ways to get across my ideas."

Neither group showed a significant difference in approach to the writing process, although quantifying the differences and

approaches was difficult. A more thorough study on the success of individual approaches to writing is suggested.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that there are some factors that influence success or failure in composition classes that the teacher cannot influence directly: the student's age, high school experience, motivation for attending school, and competing interests. However, the findings also indicate that there are a significant number of factors that an instructor can directly or indirectly control that may influence student success: clarity of instructions on assignments, interest-holding instructional techniques, quality/quantity of feedback on writing assignments, individualized attention, information and directions about how to seek tutorial help, and openness and encouragement towards personal rapport.

The study shows that students generally are not facing academic problems that are unique to the composition course. The implication of this finding suggests a wholistic approach to helping students' needs, one where the student receives counseling and assistance about his or her approach to all academic studies.

Extremely significant in this study is that over half of the failing students interviewed are no longer enrolled in school, most with no plans to return. The lesson is clear: failing students become dropouts. Also significant in this study is the fact that **nearly one fourth of the students who failed freshman composition had retaken the course and failed again.** Perhaps some light is shed on this problem when responses to the question, "If you had a chance to retake English 101, what would you do differently?" are closely scrutinized. Unique to the responses of the failing students is a lack of clear direction or a new approach that would indicate a greater likelihood of success. Typical responses included, "I would try harder and give more effort." Another student replied, "I would cut back my work schedule to 40 hours a week." The implication of these findings is clear: teachers and students would benefit from a program that: 1) intercedes when students fail a class 2) requires remedial coursework before a student is allowed to re-enroll in the same class, and 3) provides directional counseling.

The study suggests that preparedness, strategy, and approach to assignments may be as important as the quantity of time. There are exceptions to this rule, however. As one student who earned a 4.0 in freshman composition explained, "English comes a lot harder for me than math, chemistry, or physics. I knew I would have a tough time, so I prepared myself. I usually spent 21 hours a week doing homework for that class."

Do students believe that instructors "cause" their success or failure?" Clearly 84% of the failing students said that they were primarily at fault for their lack of success in freshman composition. However, these same students also said that they wanted: increased individualized attention, greater clarity on assignments, and more "entertaining" classes. Conversely, most of the successful students who excelled said that they were the primary cause of their success. However, as noted earlier, 40% of the A students said that the teacher was somehow at fault for their lack of even greater achievement. Many of the successful students wanted: greater clarity in direction, more time on writing assignments, more individualized attention, and an even greater push from the instructor to excel.

How Close Can You Get?

Nearly a third of the A students said that the primary reason that they met with success was because they consistently sought out the instructor for guidance and feedback on writing assignments. Some of the failing students recognized the importance of establishing rapport with the instructor although expressed mixed feelings about establishing closer ties with their teacher. As one student noted, "I tend to not want to get really close to the teacher. If I had a closer relationship with the instructor, then I think that I would do better." Another student who failed replied, "I'm intimidated by teachers...I always have been." Many students need and want individual help

and attention, but may be unable to express this need to the instructor and/or establish a helpful working relationship.

The strategy students employ in completing writing assignments warrants further study. Clearly, the average A student spends only about an hour more each week completing homework. However, student responses suggest that the successful student generally begins the writing task by "thinking about the topic" for a longer period of time and then completing a greater number of drafts. One student, when asked about her strategy for writing, responded, "I don't know the process of writing...that's why I failed."

On the average, failing students spent 5 hours more each week at outside jobs, also competing for their time and energies. For these students, greater care needs to be excercised to ensure that they are directed to fewer credit hours and/or remedial courses before they begin freshman composition (and courses of similar work loads).

The implication of this study for teachers, counselors, and students suggest that students will have a greater likelihood of success if they have clear direction and self-motivation for attending college. This study supports that direction and motivation increases with the older student, perhaps as life goals are more clearly defined.

To review in part, instructors need to be aware that almost all students sincerely appreciated the individualized attention that they received. Successful students had an easier time in establishing a close working relationship with their teacher, although they were more ready to blame the instructor for not excelling even futher in the class. Failing students had a difficult time establishing a close relationship with the instructor, but put the primary blame for their lack of achievement on themselves. ~~The implication here for instructors is that one-to-one teaching is an excellent investment. Also,~~ Greater efforts on the part of the teacher to reach out to certain students, to be approachable and encourage friendly exchange, will likely result in greater achievement for students who have traditionally fearful of asking for help.

This study only begins to explore the differences in perceptions, motivations, and attitudes of students that excel and students that fail composition. In addition, there are various ways to interpret the data generated by this study, and perhaps more questions have been raised than have been answered. Some of the questions raised that deserve further exploration include: What instructional strategies prove most successful in motivating students to achieve the greatest results? How can high schools better prepare students for college-level writing? What early warning intervention can the instructor employ to help ensure the success of all students of composition? Are the results of this

study unique only to freshman composition courses? What questions and strategies should counselors employ to better direct freshman students? What is the most effective way to teach a class that meets the multi-varied interests, motivations, attitudes, and backgrounds of the students?

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